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Don't Let a Partisan Agenda Derail Vital Trade Pact

By Bill Center

It was disappointing to learn that three Washington state congressmen — Democrats Brian Baird, Rick Larsen and Adam Smith — plan to vote against the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

Their stated reasons have more to do with their clear dissatisfaction with Republicans in the administration and Congress, and less to do with CAFTA. Both Smith and Larsen have solid records on trade, and their calls for funding transition assistance, small-business loans, education and research should be heeded.

Even so, CAFTA is too vital to long-term U.S. security and economic interests to be stalled by a thorny partisan agenda.

Ninety-six percent of the world's consumers live outside the United States. Washington state workers produce the best products and services in the world. Those exports face barriers in Central America, Asia and elsewhere. Only by tearing down those walls will our economy grow, innovate and thrive. And only by prying open foreign markets to U.S. goods and services will Washington be able to continue generating high-quality, high-wage jobs.

After more than two decades of encouragement by the U.S., the democratically elected leaders of the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras came to the table prepared to negotiate lower trade barriers so their citizens could have improved access to the global marketplace.

Offering those nascent democracies the opportunity to plug into the global economy provides them an essential tool. Success hinges on their leaders' ability to deliver real economic results — prosperity and improved living standards — to people who have struggled for years under the double yoke of poverty and oppression. Countries open to trade grow faster, and each 1-percent increase in gross domestic product reduces poverty by 1.5 percent.

Still, CAFTA is just a trade agreement, not a cure-all. It focuses on reducing tariffs and other barriers to trade. No trade agreement alone can lift the poor out of poverty, save the rain forest or improve health care. But trying to address poverty and other social ills without open access and full participation in the global marketplace is like trying to assist someone's breathing by cutting off their supply of oxygen.

CAFTA is not perfect, but it's a major improvement on the status quo. Supporters and opponents alike agree on the need for better trade rules. By any objective measure, CAFTA is the best, most-progressive agreement yet negotiated by the U.S. with any

international partner. CAFTA is not the end of negotiations; rather it is a critical early step in an ongoing process.

Unlike the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), environmental and labor protections are written directly into CAFTA. That difference helps account for the broad support the agreement has received from Central American environmental groups. To quote one Honduran diplomat: "CAFTA rhymes with NAFTA; that's where the similarity ends."

CAFTA builds on 20 years of manufacturing and agricultural progress that helped stabilize a troubled region. Some \$32 billion in goods already move annually between the U.S. and these six countries, supporting more than 200,000 U.S. jobs. CAFTA will help American yarn and fiber suppliers retain a vital market. It will give American exports access to growing new markets. Perhaps that's why the American textile industry has joined more than 60 national agricultural groups, the high-tech industry, manufacturers and business groups in supporting CAFTA.

Who does that leave in opposition? CAFTA is opposed by an unusual ad hoc coalition of environmentalists, labor, the U.S. sugar lobby and NAFTA opponents. It may ultimately fall victim not to them, but to the current highly charged partisan atmosphere in Congress. How can we condone holding the poor people of Central America hostage to the U.S. domestic political agenda?

With CAFTA, we strengthen our own economy by offering U.S. exports better access to a market with a population the size of California, and at the same time demonstrate that our commitment to the Doha Round principle of economic development for poor nations is more than empty rhetoric.

CAFTA is a real opportunity for the U.S. to be a good neighbor to our fellow Americans. Will we look for excuses to retain the unacceptable status quo, or set an example that will bolster prosperity here at home and demonstrate that we value political stability, regional cooperation and the economic development of our smaller, poorer neighbors?

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